

Letter to the Editor

Down Syndrome and Natural Family Planning

To the Editor:

We appreciate the interest of James [1996] in our recent report [Castilla et al., 1995]. Of course, it is self-evident that definitively assessing the deleterious effect of aging gametes requires a more rigorous study design, namely, a cohort study in which date of conception is correlated with subsequent outcome. As reported in previous publications [Simpson et al., 1988, 1991; Gray et al., 1995], such a study has been underway for several years. Approximately 1,100 pregnancies of couples who used NFP have been ascertained in Chile, Peru, Colombia, Italy, and the United States. Data on congenital anomalies and Down syndrome should be available within a year, further testing the hypothesis with which we and the genetic community have long been intrigued [German, 1968; Simpson, 1983]. In some of the above citations [Simpson, 1983; Simpson et al., 1988], we detail the biologic basis of the aging gamete hypothesis and the pitfalls of extant studies.

Although we acknowledge the inevitable limitations of the case-control design utilized for the study reported in this journal, our work does have several strengths. It is population-based, has a very large sample size, and is characterized by systematic outcome evaluation. Moreover, analyzing women who practice NFP is a step closer to identifying couples at increased risk for conceptions involving aging gametes than is analysis of an entire Roman Catholic population or region, given that <10% of Catholics practice NFP. Thus our population-based data are more useful than several studies cited by James [1995], namely Sigler et al., [1967] and Mulcahy [1978]. Nevertheless, we recognize the limitations and state precisely the applicable power calculation.

Sex ratio is a separate issue, one that is also being addressed in our prospective study. We are well aware of James's thoughts from his many commentaries and letters. Suffice it to say here that we and others attach less biologic significance than does James [1995] to the relatively small statistical variation in sex ratio observed in certain circumstances [Simpson, 1995; Wilcox et al., 1995].

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